

FRIENDS OF MELVILLE KOPPIES



NATURE • HERITAGE • HIKING

Melville Koppies Management Committee (MKMC)

Annual report for the financial year 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026

to the FOMK AGM, 19 September 2026

Introduction and Farewell

This has been a very busy year and a very sad time as we've had to say goodbye to Wendy Carstens who has moved to Cape Town. Mention Melville Koppies to people and they'll say, 'Oh Wendy Carstens'; not surprising since she's been involved with Melville Koppies since 1997, held the chair for almost 25 years up until her retirement in 2025 and instituted the massive changes that put the Koppies on a sustainable footing.



Thatching grass towers above Wendy

I said at last year's AGM that taking over from her was a bit like trying to slip into the eight tentacles of an octopus. As I've come to understand more and more of what she did, and what she achieved, I have great admiration for how she did it all so effortlessly. When she returns later in the year to visit, we will celebrate with her and honour her immeasurable contribution.

What has helped me fill her tentacles is our active committee: Alison Wilson has taken on the Treasurer role,

Barbara Shaw coordinates the Sunday morning reception duties while numerous other members are always there to give wise advice, offer practical solutions, **AND do** the actual work. Having such a proactive committee is unusual in my experience in the NGO/NPO space.

Our school guides deserve a special mention, many of them having just joined us. It feels as if we've had more school groups this past year, many of them high school students. We've had to up our game to cover geography for Grade 11s and 12s and often this has meant our guides embracing new information or dredging up learnings from decades ago!

Then there is our magnificent group of volunteers. The long list is appended to this report. Whether it's helping at reception on a Sunday morning, guiding Sunday visitors or school tours, leading 8km hikes, or weeding on Sunday mornings, you are always able and willing. Thank you.

Conservation

Like other 'Friends' groups across Joburg, we manage the conservation of Melville Koppies for Johannesburg City Parks in a joint-venture relationship. We always tell City Parks that we have the exciting part of the job: to work in this special place and to look after it. All they get is complaining letters from us!

Our relationship is fraught at times because City Parks seems to lack the budget to fix things and their systems and processes take time; we are impatient and want things done today.

Conserving the last remnants of the endangered Highveld Grassland Biome at Melville Koppies continues to be our main focus. It entails conserving and protecting the heritage of surviving fauna and traces of past people who once lived here and the constant eradication of invasive alien species and bush encroachment to ensure the Koppies survive for current and future generations.



Conserving the last remnants of the endangered Highveld Grassland Biome at Melville Koppies continues to be our main focus

We couldn't do this without our full-time conservation team of Lucky Nyathi (since 2004), Joseph Kasonga (since 2007 - works one day a week), Clement Nkomazana (since 2008) and Best Nkomazana (since 2011). Their experience working daily with Wendy Carstens and Tam Scheidegger over many years means

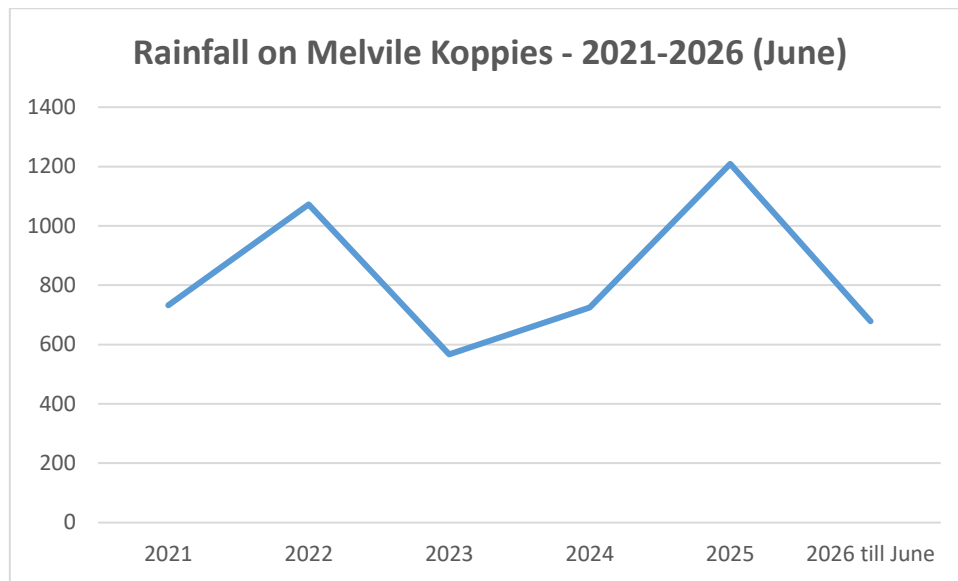
they now know what needs doing and work more or less without supervision. Tam Scheidegger often works with them or on her own, head down and focused on the pesky weeds.

We follow a fire management programme, keeping track of which areas of grassland were burnt and when. Over the past few years, uncontrolled fires set by careless trespassers have swept across the Koppies. This year we recorded the highest rainfall in the past six years and the conservation team experienced its effects: an explosion of weed seed banks. In many areas of the Koppies, they had to return to the same place to remove the second or third crop of weeds.



The conservation team are not afraid to get into the bush and remove the weeds

Rainfall stats for Melville Koppies



The average for the area is 750mm p.a.

Year: 2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026 till June	
mm: 1046	732	1072	567	725	1209	678	

We continue to monitor the highly invasive *Campuloclinium macrocephalum* (Pompom weed) and remove it by digging it out as soon as we spot it.

How we fund our conservation team

We have to fund our conservation team ourselves; our joint venture with City Parks allows us to charge an entrance fee to visitors but we still have to entice visitors to the gates. We try all free publicity avenues as we have no publicity budget and largely use Facebook and Instagram to publicise our upcoming events.

We open almost every Sunday morning charging R100 per adult; U18 R50; U5s are free. This has remained the same for many years and we'd like to keep it at this rate for as long as we can. Special thanks to Barbara Shaw who coordinates the Sunday morning volunteers – without her and her team we wouldn't be able to open.



We offer:

- Self-guided hiking, walking, bird-watching
- Guided walks on the archaeology, history, geology, ecology etc.
- A monthly 8 km group hike
- Monthly storytelling with storyteller Merle Grace
- Occasional art afternoons
- Annual trail running race with the Trail Fund Project

The 8km group hike on the last Sunday of the month continues to be a crowd pleaser

We also offer specialist tours on Sundays or other days e.g. birding, team-building, spring flowers. And over the past year we've hosted two art afternoons on the Koppies. Professional artist, Bronwen Findlay has facilitated the session with photographer Sally Gaule providing photographic inspiration.



A geography learner from Tersia Academy in Tembisa examines different grain sizes in different rocks



A botany student photographs a ledebouria

For schools:

The Koppies provide an outdoor classroom for an extensive range of subjects for Grades 1-12: geography, ecology/life sciences, history (hunter-gatherers and early farmers), tourism, physical activity and life orientation.

For university students:

- **Ecology students** from Wits University are regular visitors to the Koppies; they get involved in controlled burns and measure grass load etc. before and after the burn;
- **1st year Wits Geology students**, come every year; the visit provides them with an early insight into the different fields of geology and what becoming a geologist entails;
- **Architecture students (Wits)** visited to look at the design of the early farmer settlements and learn about how the society was structured; and
- **Greenside Design students** visit annually to draw up proposals for Melville Koppies (the new bird-watching guide is a result of this).

Since 1972, a **team of bird ringers** has been carrying out bird ringing on the second Saturday of the month. Their data provide a valuable record of the changing bird population on the Koppies.

New activities we are planning are stargazing; quarterly talks on issues related to Melville Koppies (the first one was held in July on the geology of Melville Koppies); working with a local Melville Bakery to offer a combined yoga morning; history walk and talk with a traditional food picnic; widening the path from Kafue Road to enable wheelchair access to activities at the lecture hut; a quarterly newsletter to update people about our activities.

None of these activities would be possible without our dedicated team of volunteer school guides and our Sunday morning reception volunteers.

Research, fieldwork and projects

Being so close to Wits and UJ enables us to encourage students to use the Koppies as their place of research. Tam Scheidegger oversees these students for the Koppies. Four research teams have been busy in 2026:

- Kelsey (local resident) and lecturer at Wits in genetics and landscape ecology took samples of *Alloteropsis serulata* (blackseed grass) and *Themeda triandra* (rooigrass) to see if polyploidy (where a cell or organism has more than two complete sets of chromosomes) was a function of distribution within the tuft of grass.
- Sinqobile from UJ, under the tutorship of Morgan Raath, continued collecting data for analysis on the distribution of a scale insect that is hosted by our iconic *Protea afra*. Unfortunately, they seem to be a natural protea population control agent. Our high density and number of proteas are vulnerable to their infestation (like the effect of Covid in a city). This time, Sinqobile included height of the trees (to see the effects of high fire flames), distance between trees and aspect inclination in his data collection on the scale infestation. The fire that went through the Koppies on 17 July 2026 has burnt most of the proteas and the scale, so only trees which were taller than 2.5m remain infected and will continue to spread the parasite.
- A City Parks Manager, Boitumelo, studying through UNISA and looking at problematic plants, did some site analysis earlier in the year on the *Celtis* hybrids foresting the Arboretum.

- Thato, who is studying under Ben Eric van Wyk at UJ, collected some samples of wilde-als. He is investigating whether the potency of medicinal plants is different in natural soils versus cultivated soils. Thato will be comparing differences in the DNA samples across the country.

Number of visitors

The total number of recorded visitors on Melville Koppies Central was 2 775; 1 754 on Sundays and 1 021 booked groups, marginally up from 2025 but we have still not reached the high numbers last seen before COVID.

We've noticed fewer government schools visiting; the tightened rules for school trips after the death of a learner from Parktown Boys School on a school trip and the high costs of bus transport may be contributing factors. The cost per pupil is R50 and the guides are volunteers, so those costs are not a factor. We were delighted to get a school from as far away as Warmbaths earlier this year who came to study life sciences.

Visitor numbers for the past eight financial years (including school visitors)



2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020 (Covid)	2019
2775	2554	2379	2037	2553	2182	1670	2901

Cleaning the spruit

The spruit which passes through the Koppies continues to bring in litter, debris, and sewerage. We regularly test the water (using WaterCAN's test kits) and almost always find it is 'unsafe for drinking'. When one considers that the Westdene Spruit only starts in Brixton up the hill, it's a terrible indictment of those living upstream from the Koppies who throw litter on the roads, out of car windows etc., all of which finds its way into stormwater drains that end in all the river courses, including our spruit. Joburg Water's old, leaking sewerage infrastructure adds to the problem.

Wits PhD student, Siphelele Mbangata, has been studying the spruit that runs through Melville Koppies since September 2024. Based on her data from September 2024 to August 2026, the

Westdene Stream is classified as **Critically Modified** (Very Poor Condition). Below are the details of her findings:

“It mainly functions as a conduit for urban waste and sewage rather than supporting a healthy aquatic ecosystem. All indicators, including bacterial levels and macroinvertebrate diversity, point to continuous ecological decline. The most urgent issue is the persistent presence of the faecal indicator bacteria, E. coli. E. coli presence signifies high pathogen risk, while the stable black coliform readings across nearly all dates highlight a serious public health concern. This colour indicates bacteria that produce hydrogen sulphide, suggesting anaerobic conditions.

Biological data from March 2026, across upstream, midstream, and downstream sites, showed an average miniSASS score of 4.3, classifying the stream as ‘Purple’ (Critically Modified). The macroinvertebrate community lacks sensitive species such as stoneflies and mayflies and is dominated by pollution-tolerant organisms like worms, leeches, and snails, which survive in environments with high organic loads and chemical instability. Large amounts of solid waste further stress the ecosystem.”



Thank you Siphelele, the guardian angel of our spruit, for going beyond research. From May 2025 to April 2026, she organised four clean-up events of the spruit with the Wits Aquatic Club and Hlanzekile River and Ocean Cleaning (pic on right shows the two teams in June 2025).

These teams don't just pick up litter from the river banks – they walk into the river with waders and braai tongs to extract plastic wrapped around tree roots mixed with massive amounts of textile waste, weigh what they've removed and then separate what can be recycled. They have removed over 1,057.2 kilograms of trash, including at least 52 bags of litter. All of this buildup of plastic and household waste blocks the waterway, fosters bacterial growth, and releases additional harmful chemicals.

AR/VR project with UJ

The Melville Koppies smelter now has an upgrade thanks to Izak Potgieter from UJ. In May, the new AR video, with an accompanying display board that gives more detail about ironmaking in Gauteng in the 1700s, was launched. It is proving popular across all ages.

Fencing

Theft of palisade fencing continues to be a challenge. Replacement is dependent on volunteers and community funding. Occasionally JCPZ replaces some stolen/smashed fence sections. Clearvu fencing could be a welcome solution however we have been told that there is no budget for this.

Security

Given the frequent missing slats from the fence, we increase security on Sunday mornings, funding one guard ourselves while the Melville Security Initiative (MSI) funds a Beagle guard. Thank you MSI.

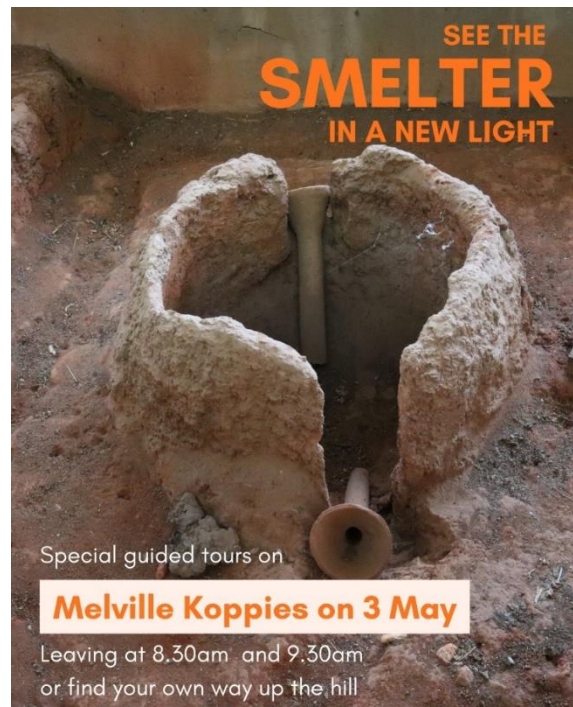
One of the City-employed guards from Vast Security also sits at the gate on Judith Road on Sunday mornings while we are open.

Melville Koppies West (under JCPZ maintenance)

Thanks to the volunteer-organised Saturday monthly walk and work parties, Melville Koppies West is still a community asset. Permission was sought from City Parks and invasive trees (wattles, pines and gums) were cut down and removed from the ridges by a private contractor.



The pile of pines and wattles removed from Melville Koppies West



We put on special guided tours of the smelter to coincide with the new AR video and display board

The work parties continue to clear some of the ridges of bugweeds and lantanas. Not having a permanent weeding team to keep the invasives at bay means that the seeds of bugweed and mothcatcher creepers, particularly along the Beyers Naude fence, are continually brought by birds or blown into Melville Koppies Central.

Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ)

JCPZ continues to provide 24-hour security for Melville Koppies Central – four outsourced VAST day guards and two night guards.

City Parks organises the cutting of trail paths, perimeters and stretches under pylons as well as the trimming of trees on the boundaries to aid security.

Pipes at the toilet at the reception hut on Judith Road were stolen, resulting in the water being turned off and the toilet closed. Petty theft of various items continues from the storeroom at the reception hut.

A tribute to MK's volunteers

The table below lists all those who hold the Koppies together. Thank you to all of you for your support, guidance and encouragement. We look forward to another year of excitement, challenges and surprises.

Jenny Grice, Melville Koppies Chairperson, September 2026

Tribute to MK's volunteers

Alphabetical list of people and their contributions to Melville Koppies (CM = committee member)

Alison Wilson	CM Multi-tasking as Front of House, guide, Melville Koppies east walk leader, and Treasurer
Anthony Paton	The Bird Man - Bird atlasser, guide, guide trainer since 2005
Arjen Van Zwieten	Bird ringer, and guide, especially if geology is required. Always willing to help out if he is available.
Aubrey Moloto	CM Committee member, media whizz and guide and a Melville Resident promoting the Koppies and Melville in his 'snapson7th' newsblog
Barbara Shaw	CM Our webmaster and Front of House manager. Come rain, hail or shine Barbara is there to welcome visitors.
Craig Natrass	Monthly bird ringing co-ordinator. Craig and his team ensure the research value of the Koppies.
Danny Nunes	CM Danny is 'Mr Fixit', willing to help wherever he can, at all hours, at the Koppies and in Melville, alone or with his CREASS team. He has many challenges, such as continual theft of old and new fencing slats.
David Dickinson	Guardian of Melville Koppies West. Caring for the safety and security of organised groups. Organising /joining work parties to eradicate some of the large alien infestations.
Elsje Bonthuys	CM Passionate, inspirational leader of the 'War on Weeds' contingent, Front of House helper, legal adviser, party arranger, and monthly financial contributor.
Floyd Nyai and Siphelele Mbangata	His enthusiastic band of volunteers from Hlanzekile River and Ocean Cleaning, plus Siphelele Mbangata's Wits Aquatic Club team do regular cleanups of the very polluted Westdene Spruit.
Jenny Grice	CM Guide, PR, chairperson
MA Farquharson	CM MK East walk organiser, controller of 9 th Ave gate locking control
Marné Marais	Outgoing CM Recently resigned from the committee due to work pressure. Was always willing to undertake any task, full of ideas and sound advice (including legal), and a regular financial supporter.

Merle Grace	The wonderful storyteller, charming all with her heritage tales every 2 nd Sunday of the month since March 2025
Michelle De Villiers	The obliging, cheerful owner of JUNKIE charity store. Proceeds from sales of pre-loved goods earmarked for Melville Koppies have been a consistent financial boon for the Koppies. Thank you Michelle.
MK East users	You make our conservation efforts worthwhile!
Monthly donors	Your contributions are all noted and really appreciated
Reception helpers	Barbara Shaw, Cynthia Rose, Wendell Westley, Bryan, Michiko Kaneko, Cheryl Werner, Alison Wilson, Rameen Lakhani, Merle Grace.
Sarah Charlton	CM Multi-tasking and helping wherever needed. Part of the 'War on Weeds' group.
School guides	Thanks to Alison Wilson, Annie Eckhart, Annie Smyth, Felicity Kitchin, Jenny Grice, Liam Carey, Ruby Miles, Sandy Murray, Tam Scheidegger and Wendy Carstens for your environmental education of hundreds of kids
Siphelele Mbangata	A MKMC volunteer and Witsie working on water quality and cleaning the Westdene Spruit of litter.
Sunday 8km group hike helpers	Thanks to Tony Cross, Alison Wilson, Musarrat Safi (incoming CM for 2027), Karabo Maila, Jade Bronstein-Brenner, Sarah Charlton, Merle Grace, Danny Nunes, Marné Marais, Tom Warren, Logan Cloete, Siphelele Mbangata.
Sunday War on weeds	Amanda, Annetjie, Gill, Jennifer, Kathryn, Natasha, Sarah, Tam.
Tam Scheidegger	CM Guide, researcher, passionate conservationist with a broad understanding of conservation.
Tony Lelliott	CM MK West representative, birding guide, organiser of monthly walks with dogs on the West, Google and TripAdvisor and MySchool monitor
Wendy Carstens	Outgoing CM Now retired to Cape Town. The Koppies have been her inspiration and love since 1997; the Koppies wouldn't be what they are without her guidance and hard work.